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March 2, 1942

Critics'

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1942
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†"Plan M" opened Friday, February 20th, at the Belasco Theatre.
†"Under This Roof" opened Sunday, February 22nd, at the Windsor Theatre.
†"Guest in the House" opened Tuesday, February 24th, at the Plymouth Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

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"Guest in the House"

NEW YORK POST
February 25, 1942

"Guest in the House" Opens At the Plymouth Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

THE familiar parable of the visiting relative who disrupts a normally tranquil household and never knows when to go home is elaborately retold with psychopathic trimmings and a dash of hysteria in "Guest in the House," the new play produced last night at the Plymouth Theatre. It is obviously contrived with the worthy purpose of galvanizing an audience into a tense state of excitement, tearing its emotions to tatters and sending it home limp and shuddering, vowing never, never, never to entertain a sweet, humble second cousin with a vague heart ailment and a bad habit of playing "Liebestraum" over and over on the phonograph.

The effect on this reviewer was hardly what the playwrights intended. "Guest in the House" struck us as a ridiculously overdone concoction that tried very hard to impress but succeeded more often than not in being merely silly.

It is the sort of play that could be stopped in its tracks at almost any moment by the exercise of a pinch of commonsense on the part of almost any of the victims of the little brat from Cleveland who comes to visit the Proctors at their country place near Trumbull, Conn., because she is Ann Proctor's cousin and they are sorry for her. She begins at once to interfere with the domestic happiness of the Proctors, and succeeds with remarkably little difficulty in driving Douglas, the artist, to drink, bringing Ann to the verge of a nervous breakdown, making a sniveling little hypochrondriac of their healthy young daughter, and sending the servants away in a boiling rage.

Evelyn, the Guest in the House, has an easy time of it from start to finish. The authors and the director hustle around all evening helping to further her diabolical little plans, which are anything but subtle. Although the audience is supposed to consider the Proctors and their friends persons of normal intelligence and perspicacity, they all have blind-spots for an incredibly long time where Evelyn is concerned, though she could hardly have fooled a baby. Whenever it is necessary to clear the stage for her to operate, it is miraculously achieved by sending everybody out of doors or into the kitchen.

When Ann and, eventually, Douglas do recognize their tormentor for what she is they obligingly let her slip out of their clutches, and although she is clearly a mental case, fit for incarceration, they permit her to put on quite an act before her providential terror of birds finally solves the problem.

Although some well-known actors are involved, almost none of "Guest in the House" seems even faintly believable. There is, however, humor here and there that is welcome, and we must admit that some of the more serious moments also gave us a laugh.

As Ann, the hard-pressed hostess, Louise Campbell played with so much charm and intelligence that we were sometimes almost convinced that all this was actually happening. Leon Ames is a pleasant actor, but he had a difficult time of it last night trying to play a sensible fellow who behaved as if he hadn't the brains of a gnat. Fert Kelton as the artist's model made something of her comedy lines when given half a chance, and there were helpful performances by Katherine Emmet, Joan Spencer and Frieda Altman, among others.

The brat herself, we were a trifle startled to note, was played by an actress named Mary Anderson. This is a great name in theatre history, and it is surprising to find it printed in a Broadway program these days to identify a young film actress making her debut on the stage. This, we are told, is Mary Anderson of Paramount. Handicapped by a role that probably no actress on earth could have rendered entirely credible, Miss Anderson tried hard but, not unnaturally, proved to be somewhat shrill and monotonous as the evening wore on.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
February 25, 1942

Bad Girl

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

IN ANY list of the drama's disagreeable women the name of the leading character in "Guest in the House" would stand high. A sweet-faced invalid, who appeals to the protective instincts of both men and women, she is at heart a nasty, selfish, conniving and generally evil creature who would have shocked the late Hedda Gabler. The spiritual daughter of the horrible child in "The Children's Hour"—provided that little monster was ever allowed to grow up—the young woman in the play by Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson possesses a treacherous soul and a sex-crazed mind to go with her frail body, and she rewards her benefactors by breaking up their homes, spreading libels about them and turning their children into equally offensive neurotics.

• • •

Since evil young women, particularly if they are pretty, have a way of being fascinating in the theater, this Evelyn Heath does prove to be rather an arresting subject for character dissection. It happens, though, that her adventures are set down in a play which never quite makes up its mind whether it wants to be a horror melodrama or a serious study of character. Of course, there is no reason why it could not have been both, save that the authors never manage to make it seem a credible amalgamation of the two dramatic forms. The result is that "Guest in the House," despite its episodes of somewhat horrendous interest, turns out to be an over-wrought, mechanical and hysterical work which seems to have Hollywood rather than Broadway as its aim.

• • •

That such an estimate is a bit unfair to the two playwrights, I do not doubt. There seems to be little question that they were determined to write a serious and striking play on a pathological subject, with the most earnest of overtones. Their idea, too, of showing the terrible, relentless strength of the weak in dominating the presumably stronger men and women about them is an excellent one, and their story of how the sweet little monster named Evelyn Heath disrupted the family that had been kind to her and then was driven to her own destruction by one of her neuroses offers the material for admirable psychological melodrama. The trouble is that they have never really gone into their central character with the proper insight and have failed to explain her in believable dramatic terms. She is a monster, but never the sort of understandable human being that might have been both terrifying and pitiful.

• • •

For the all-important central role the producers have brought from Hollywood a young actress with the notable name of Mary Anderson. On the whole, I think it is a decidedly creditable performance that Miss Anderson offers. There is monotony about her work and she has been directed in a manner which, together with the writing of the part, makes her villainy too obvious, but she plays many of her scenes with force and believable intensity, is admirably relentless in her portrayal of pathological evil and demonstrates in general considerable promise as an actress. Miss Louise Campbell, always an excellent player, brings her usual clarity and honesty to the part of the wife whose home the evil girl would wreck, and Leon Ames is characteristically effective as the husband. In lesser roles Miss Katherine Emmett, Miss Fert Kelton and a child actress named Joan Spencer are of much help. It is my guess that "Guest in the House" is destined for the films as a vehicle for Ida Lupino. Unless, of course, young Miss Anderson plays it there.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
February 25, 1942

A Little Study in Fiendishness

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

IT WOULD appear from *Guest in the House* that the little monster of *The Children's Hour* eventually grew up and went to visit some kindly and unsuspecting relatives in Connecticut. At 20 she certainly fulfills all the rich promise she displayed at 13, and in the course of her visit she does everything to her kinsmen's home but rip out the plumbing. But in one respect—if *only* in one respect—the authors of *Guest in the House* do a completer job than Lillian Hellman did; by the end of the evening their fiend is dead. She'll crop up no more; her saga is ended.

Having worked myself into this comparison with *The Children's Hour*, I had better speedily work myself out of it. Far from being impressive drama, *Guest in the House* is essentially a lurid and overextended piece of trash. Its fitful fascination is never based on any real skill of the authors'; it is never based on anything convincing or revealing in the young villainess's behavior; it is merely based on her unquenchable ingenuity. The play hits as many wrong notes as a drunken pianist. After a while you don't even take it very seriously; it lacks not only the force of good drama but even the breathlessness of good melodrama. You soon stop trying to fathom Evelyn's mind; the only thing that interests you is: What'll she do next? For argument's sake I'll admit that she may be a perfectly sound pathological case, but I firmly maintain that nowhere except among morons or on the stage of the Plymouth would she get away with her crude and blatant mischief for more than three minutes.

It's a pile of mischief, all right, which (until Evelyn's death restores everyone's happiness) manages to drive people to drink, mess up marriages, wreck careers, ruin jobs and create a village scandal. It's fun at times and if the authors had written it tightly and tensely, or would even now mercilessly hack away great chunks of it, it might be a good deal more fun. As it is, it's too repetitious, too indifferently written, too protracted, and too determined to drag in the kitchen stove.

As the young fiend, Mary Anderson has a very juicy role which she plays effectively and sometimes skillfully, but never with any subtlety or distinction. Louise Campbell gives a well-sustained performance as the abused lady of the house, and Leon Ames a commendably natural one as the husband. Little Joan Spencer does well in a child's part and Pert Kelton is amusing as an uninhibited artist's model. Mr. Denham's direction is on the whole rather limp, and Mr. Sovey's set rather topheavy.

"Guest in the House"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
February 25, 1942

'Guest in the House' Opens at Plymouth

Mary Anderson Makes Her Stage Debut in a Somewhat Psychopathic Role

By JOHN ANDERSON

WHEN the Proctors took poor, little frail-faced Evelyn Heath into their handsome house at Trumbull, Conn., they did not know that she was a sex-mad she-devil and "Guest in the House" shows laboriously how long it took them to find out and make Evelyn scram. It took, I may add, too long.

At the Plymouth, where the play opened last night, Evelyn semed the most slimily odious character introduced by the drama since Elsa Lanchester tossed her expression around as that erotic murderess last year in "They Walk Alone."

Probably Evelyn was supposed to have the same horrible fascination that made "The Children's Hour" a memorable evening in the theatre, but here the play moves so slowly and so obviously and by such creakily over-written dialogue that the sinister effect is lost, the Proctors appear not quite bright, and Evelyn herself turns into just a tiresome neurotic, as full of yens as China, and needing the attention of a doctor (or somebody) not an audience.

Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson have based their play on a story by Katherine Albert. It is slow getting started, and dawdles over the life of the Proctors, showing him a prosperous illustrator happily married to a handsome girl, and living comfortably in a large, over-panelled and heavily blond house right up in my Summer neighborhood off the Merritt Parkway. Their little daughter, Lee, a healthily bumptious youngster and altogether you'd call them pleasant, sensible, agreeable and happy folks.

Then in comes Mrs. Proctor's cousin, Evelyn. She has heart trouble and so must be treated as an invalid. She has a psychopathic terror of birds and she plays the "Liebestraum" over and over again on the victrola in her room. I think they would have been applauded by the audience for throwing her out just for that, but the Proctors were kindly people, and probably knew that they had two acts to go.

Well, Evelyn snakes her way around, wrecks Proctor's painting, makes the servants quit, gets the sensitive little girl to imitating her heart disease, and finally disrupts the marriage of the Proctors in the hope that she can get Doug Proctor for herself. When this fails she starts a scandal, is trapped in her lie, and finally dies as they are sending her away because she fears there is a bird in the house.

I found it difficult to hate Evelyn as much as the authors seemed to expect, partly because I wasn't interested enough and partly because she seemed more a figure of pitiable mental illness than of disease, and not really well enough to attend her own lynching. The unbalanced mind may be funny, as in "Arsenic and Old Lace" or tragical as in any number of murder-suicide plots, but as a strictly social menace it deserves as much of the community and demands as much knowledge from it, as tuberculosis.

Effective Playing

Even the enormously effective playing of Mary Anderson in a monotonous part doesn't give the play enough sinister fascination to sustain it. Miss Anderson makes her stage debut after considerable work in Hollywood, and gives an interesting account of herself in a performance that is clever and resourceful.

She makes Evelyn look like a purring wild cat drawn by Aubrey Beardsley, and makes her sound twice as frightening.

The others range from good to so-so under Reginald Denham's lagging direction, though it is fair to report that Mr. Sovey's setting seemed too ostentatiously elaborate, too busy in details, and very distracting. Louise Campbell, played Mrs. Proctor sensibly and attractively, Pert Kelton made the most of a few amusing lines as a model, and Leon Ames turned in his likeable and reliable portrait of a good guy in a bad way.

'GUEST IN THE HOUSE'

A play in three acts by Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson, from a story by Katherine Albert; directed by Reginald Denham; setting by Raymond Sovey; presented at the Plymouth Theatre on February 24, 1942, by Stephen and Paul Ames. The cast:

Ann Proctor	Louise Campbell
Lee Proctor	Joan Spencer
Hilda	Hildred Price
The Rev. Dr. Shaw	Walter Beck
Aunt Martha Proctor	Katherine Emmet
Miriam Blake	Pert Kelton
Dan Proctor	William Prince
Douglas Proctor	Leon Ames
John	Oscar Sterling
Evelyn Heath	Mary Anderson
Frank Dow	Richard Barbee
Mrs. Dow	Helen Stewart
Miss Rhodes	Frieda Altman
Cam Tracy	Robert Breton

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
February 25, 1942

"Guest in the House" Story Of a Home-Wrecking Visitor

"Guest in the House," drama by Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson. Produced by Stephen and Paul Ames at the Plymouth Theatre, New York, Feb. 24, 1942.

★ ★ ★—

By BURNS MANTLE

LET'S to the best news first. "Guest in the House" is a taut little horror drama to which two of the better scenario writers of Hollywood, Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson, have given generously of their talents and their experience.

Its best scenes come late in the play, which is where best scenes belong, and rouse an audience to considerable emotional response, both because they are well written and because they are well played.

The acting company includes Mary Anderson, a young woman making her legitimate theatre debut who, though she is playing a part artificially contrived to give her every advantage, is still able to indicate a gift for emotional expression that is promising in one of her years and experience.

The production is handsome and solid, and Reginald Denham's direction is in the most effective tradition of the horror drama. Being co-author of "Ladies in Retirement" Mr. Denham may be accepted as one who knows his job.

Hopeful Producers

Furthermore, "Guest in the House" is the first production of two young men who have been saving their money and their enthusiasm for a long time looking to this experience of becoming play producers. They have, I may tell you, made a thoroughly good physical job of their first venture. Their names are Stephen and Paul Ames.

If I am forced, having said this much, to confess disappointment in Miss Wilde's and Mr. Eunson's drama, you may lay it partly to the fact that for two or three weeks people have been coming to this desk advising me to be of good cheer, because this "Guest in the House" was a fine drama and would help a lot to bolster this soggy dramatic season.

"Guest in the House" is a good drama, but unhappily it is not that good. And it is definitely negative drama, in that it concerns the adventure of a young woman who is mentally ill, and who could not, I feel, have fooled the people with whom she came to live for more than a single act, to say nothing of three.

Furthermore, having discovered her condition, their first and most humane thought would have been to have her committed to an institution, rather than to be satisfied with freeing themselves quickly and completely of her presence.

Press Hounds Ahoy

Evelyn Heath is the young woman in question. She is sent in from Cleveland to live with her relatives, the Proctors. She is afflicted with some sort of a weird complex which forces her into a state bordering hysteria at the sight of birds. How she ever got through the park I wouldn't know. Or perhaps it was caged birds only that affected her.

Immediately she begins worrying the Proctors, and the audience. But it is four months before the Proctors realize that she is driving Mr. Proctor to drink, Mrs. Proctor to the sanitarium and their little daughter into a decline.

When they would be rid of her she tears her waist open; flees to the minister's; accuses Proctor of attacking her and starts the more sensational press hounds after the story.

It seems to me the chief thing Hollywood dramatists will have to overcome is their seemingly fixed tendency to think in terms of the false names, false faces and false emotions of their fiction-mad community.

The obvious object of the authors of "Guest in the House" is to build a largely unbelievable drama merely for the effect it may have as drama, with little thought of it as a truly begotten emotional and human experience.

Accepting their play on their terms, it is plotted with some skill, and when it does reach the human and moving scenes of family understanding it is moving and fine. Otherwise I found it disappointing.

Miss Anderson's is easily the showiest performance. Louise Campbell, playing the wife, has the harder job. Leon Ames is excellent as the husband. Pert Kelton helps with the humor, Katherine Emmett adds family quality as a sympathetic aunt, and Joan Spencer plays a 10-year-old brightly.

"Guest in the House"

NEW YORK TIMES
February 25, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Guest in the House"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

BEFORE inviting people into the home, see "Guest in the House," which was acted at the Plymouth last evening. Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson have written a mordant torture yarn about a suburban couple who give houseroom to a female guest and live to wring their hands in anguish. If the program did not announce that "Guest in the House" comes from a story by Katherine Albert, you might suspect that it is "The Man Who Came to Dinner" crossed with "The Children's Hour," for it is the brat version of hospitality under duress.

• • •

In tone it is closer to the second than to the first. Shrewdly written, dextrously acted, it is likely to give you the horrors before the authors and actors dispose of the menace with the greatest of ease. If they had shown any signs of letting the little monster escape from the scene of her crimes, the first night audience would have rushed up on the stage and torn her limb from limb. For Evelyn Heath, a part sharply played by Mary Anderson, is the most hateful junior hussy in the United States.

Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth when she comes to the Proctor home in the first act. She has heart trouble, which endears her to the sympathetic husband and wife who have invited her to stay as their guest in the country, where she can rest and enjoy nature. But Evelyn is studying to be a malicious she-devil. First, she makes trouble between Douglas Proctor, an illustrator, and Miriam Blake, his hardiest model. She rings for the maid as if she owned the place. She plays a record of the "Liebestraum" until every one else in the house goes mad. After two or three months, dear little Evelyn practically wrecks the Proctor home, and stirs up a pathological scandal. Although she is boring from within, she is scarcely boring from without. She is worth careful strangling. Hedda Gabler is a country milkmaid beside dear little Evelyn Heath.

• • •

As a work of art, "Guest in the House" is not exactly a masterpiece. The authors have put it together one step at a time. Particularly in the first act it takes them a considerable time to get all the details carefully planted, so that you will know where to dig them up again in the last act. But once the Evelyn evil starts flowing freely in the second act, "Guest in the House" crackles with terror and takes high rank as a heebie-geebie show. It has done more to destroy sympathy for invalids than psychoanalysis.

In his direction, Reginald Denham has craftily treated it as a nervous ordeal. Raymond Sovey has designed a large and distressing living-room full of oaken doors that open and close on trouble all evening. The Heath hussy is played by Mary Anderson, who once was screen-tested for Scarlett O'Hara and will never have any boy friends if she keeps on perfecting her technique. For she gives a brilliant performance of malevolence. She will need bodyguards if she expects to survive the Winter.

Louise Campbell and Leon Ames are excellent in the parts of the distracted Proctors. After a long sequence of ungrateful roles, Pert Kelton has something she can have some fun acting, as a flippant model with a resigned attitude toward life. Katherine Emmet, who saw a lot of trouble in "The Children's Hour," ought to feel at home in the part of Aunt Martha. As the Proctors' little daughter, Joan Spencer, is particularly entertaining in the first act before the Heath bugaboo starts poisoning the neighborhood.

For "Guest in the House" is a direfully engrossing play. One of the best things about it is getting out of the theatre and trotting down the street, a long, long way from dear little Evelyn Heah, hell-cat of the season.

NEW YORK SUN
February 25, 1942

'Guest in the House,' Cheerfully Cruel Drama, Opens at the Plymouth

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

THE authors of "Guest in the House," which opened at the Plymouth last evening, have written a sharply effective play about a pretty menace who for some summer months prowled a suburban home, disrupting family life and setting pleasant people at one another's throats. They have told their story maliciously well, ranging with little effort from something amusingly close to farce to shrill tragedy which flays the nerves. But you can never say of them that their hearts are in the right place.

Because, beneath its theatrical vigor and its adroit management of the emotions, "Guest in the House" is as unthinkably cruel a play as I can remember to have seen. The pretty menace is, you see, quite mad. She is twisted by fears and pathologically intense hungers. In the end, instead of sending her to a psychiatrist, one of the pleasant people frightens her to death. This is done, so far as I can gather, with the complete approval of Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson, who adapted the play from a story by Katherine Albert. The audience is invited to accept the outcome as a pretty solution of problems which had begun to be really troublesome.

The audience does, since the authors are shrewd. Throughout, the audience agrees with the authors to think of little Evelyn Heath as if she were responsible for her actions, although the actions can be explained only on the basis of mental irresponsibility. When she is thwarted temporarily, the audience is tauntingly satisfied; when she pretends sweetness, the audience laughs jeeringly. And here is the picture:

Evelyn is a girl who is, or thinks she is, suffering from heart disease. She plays on her weakness and insinuates herself into the home of a cousin. At once she begins a campaign of malicious lies. She sets husband and wife against each other by telling false tales. She begins to twist their young daughter into the likeness of herself. She drives the servants from the house by her demands, hoodwinks—rather too easily, it seems to me—the easygoing husband, and finally reveals that she is sexually pathological. She also has a cleanliness neurosis and a very, advanced bird phobia. At the end she tries to create a scandal by tearing her clothes partly off and running with an improbable tale to the nearest clergyman. The authors throughout write of Evelyn as if she could be a good little girl if she wanted to, and is just being mean willfully.

It's an interesting story, effectively told. I laughed when the authors wished, enjoyed the discomfitures of Evelyn at their behest and was not sorry at her untimely end. This is a tribute to their professional skill. I also disliked the play because it seemed to me callous in attitude and essentially cruel.

The play is ably acted. Mary Anderson plays the role of Evelyn for every emotional shock in it. She also, properly, underlines the girl's psychotic condition. Louise Campbell plays the part of the wife with subtle understatement and exceptional perception. Leon Ames is excellent as the husband; Pert Kelton is tartly comic as one of the little monster's minor victims; Katherine Emmet plays the salty old aunt to the proper life. There is nowhere any lack of skill. There is only, on the part of the authors, an almost complete lack of humanity.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
February 25, 1942

Guest in the House Has Bats in the Belfry

By FRANK FARRELL

ALLERGY has come to the American theater. Of course, we all knew we were going to get it sooner or later, since Playwright Moss Hart turned psychoanalysis into such lucrative business with his Lady in the Dark. Allergy arrived last night at the Plymouth in the form of a neurotic lassie who gets the screaming meemies whenever she sees a bird. And the best way to cure an allergy, according to the authors of the new play, Guest in the House, is to murder the patient. So they do—just like in a Little Audrey story.

It's all too clear to the audience at the outset of the first act that the wacky Guest in the House, Mary Anderson, is a jittery, deluded unfortunate who could use an immediate psychiatric examination and possible commitment to an asylum. But as the final curtain is rung down one is positive that four patients really in need of a sanity commission of three good men and true are the producers and playwrights involved. For surely they have committed cold murder in disposing of their problem child about as mercifully as a terrier would snap a rat's neck. And that's not their only crime in presenting Guest in the House.

• • •

Everything is serene in the living room of the suburban Proctor home near Trumbull, Conn., at 3 in the afternoon early in April. Mr. Proctor (Leon Ames) is a happily married illustrator. Louise Campbell is his beautiful, intelligent wife. Pert Kelton is his coarse but agreeably delicious model. And Joan Spencer is about as nice a moppet to have for a daughter anywhere between here and Trumbull. It's a bright household, filled with lovely people, and the one-room set has eight doors through which all can make great entrances and exits.

But the sick relative in search of rest arrives a few minutes after 3 and the whole menage begins to go to hell. The husband takes to drink. The wife begins to suspect him and the model. Their darling daughter develops neurotic tendencies, copying the queerness of the guest. The cook and butler leave. The wife almost leaves. And as the authors "brilliantly" word it, "She's caused all sorts of trouble" four months later as the second act ends.

When the brat finally is uncovered as the foundation for the play's misery, Mr. and Mrs. Proctor decide to get rid of her by slapping her on a train for Cleveland with $500 in her purse—just like that. But Miss Anderson sneaks out of the house in the middle of the night, rips her dress to shreds and dashes to the home of the local clergyman to whom she tells a fanciful tale of having been attacked by the artist. A New York tabloid sends a reporter and photographer to haunt the house. Strife and Miss Anderson's innate nastiness prevail some more. She has the whole family by the tail when kind, gentle old Aunt Martha Proctor comes to the rescue and gives her the bird—but good, as they say in Lindy's.

• • •

Half the hearty laughs in the Plymouth were not anticipated by the director and authors. Half the horror they tried to create didn't materialize. The only thing in full strength, as a matter of fact, was the cast. Leon Ames gave an admirable performance. Pert Kelton was as fresh and shapely as the latest Powers or Conover model sensation. Mary Anderson gave a thrilling representation of a juvenile delinquent. Here's hoping they get together in a play sometime.

"Under This Roof"

NEW YORK SUN
February 23, 1942

'Under This Roof,' Static Drama, Opens at The Windsor Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

HERBERT B. EHRMANN, author of "Under This Roof" which opened at the Windsor Theater last evening, is a partisan of a good cause and supports it sincerely and with dignity. He also has a sufficiently literate style and sometimes brings to the stage the pleasant glow of quiet humor. It is unfortunate that such estimable characteristics count for little in the theater when they are not supported by the skill of a craftsman.

"Under This Roof" is only a slow parade of good intentions, because Mr. Ehrmann does not know how to make a story dramatic in the theater. His story, while not unexpected, is adequately substantial. He tells of a New England family between 1846 and 1873 and shows how in its members idealism and greed are two sides of a family coin. The Warrens, one of them comments, have usually either an itching palm or an itching conscience. Thus in 1846, one goes to fight slavery in Missouri, while his brother stays to run a mill and build a banking firm. In 1864, the son of the conservative idealistically enlists in the fight for freedom. In 1873, greed comes to a bad end and the survivor learns, through a woman who has loved all three men, that freedom is something which must be gained in battle and held in peace.

It is a sufficient story, and in it are obvious parallels to our own time. It is told without flourishes, and if the author seems here and there to have padded he is almost childishly innocent of any intention to deceive. His people, if not interesting, are reasonably convincing. They say nothing which cannot easily be anticipated, but nothing they say is meretricious.

These are negative virtues and make a negative play. The story of "Under This Roof" is lifeless on the stage; its incidents are recited, not dramatized; its conflicts are mere debates. The characters are clearly enough seen, but they are not felt. No real tension exists between them and the problems they face evoke no emotional response. Even in the midst of movement nothing seems to be happening and by the end of the evening words which should make stirring affirmations have become merely a drone. Mr. Ehrmann's respectable equipment seems to include no sense of drama whatever.

Barbara O'Neil acts with as much intensity as her role permits, and with evident skill. Russell Hardie gives shape to the shadowy character with which the author has provided him; John Draper comes near, for a moment, to animating the play by his portrait of the youngest son of the family; Harlan Briggs and James O'Neill are amusing in broadly drawn character bits and there is no fault to be found with the other actors. But they have very little to act.

'UNDER THIS ROOF'

A play in three acts by Herbert B. Ehrmann; staged by Russell Lewis; setting by Perry Watkins; presented at the Windsor Theater on February 23, 1942, by Mr. Lewis and Rita Hassan. The cast:

Granny Warren ..... Louise Galloway
Abner Warren ..... George L. Spaulding
Cornelia Warren ..... Barbara O'Neil
Ezra Warren ..... Russell Hardie
Horace Drury ..... Howard St. John
Nora ..... Hilda Bruce
Gibeon Warren ..... Peter Hobbs
David Warren ..... John Draper
Mr. Gassaway ..... Harlan Briggs
Senator Flower ..... Watson White
Eileen O'Shaughnessy ..... Alexandra Brackett
Sean O'Shaughnessy ..... Walter Burke
Sidney Snow ..... James O'Neill

NEW YORK POST
February 23, 1942

"Under This Roof," A Drama of Civil War Times, at the Windsor

By WILELLA WALDORF

HERBERT B. EHRMANN, author of "Under This Roof," and Russell Lewis and Rita Hassan, who produced it last night at the Windsor Theatre, think this is a good time to remind us that Freedom is something that many brave men have died for, not to be abused by other men in times of peace and plenty, between wars.

Mr. Ehrmann, in fact, is a playwright with a thesis that can hardly be repeated too often, and he goes about the business of writing a drama about it in earnest, wordy, somewhat declamatory fashion. It is unfortunate that although he is a writer with a message worth hearing, his play sprawls loosely about the stage, and suffers an added handicap in being laid in a country homestead outside Boston over a period from 1846 to 1873.

There have been times, of course, when plays laid a century or so ago, covering a period of some twenty-five years, were not handicapped by these circumstances, but more often than not they mean episodic dramas in which numerous characters are of necessity confined to one scene, while those who survive grow older than they ought to, and spend an immense amount of time at the beginning of each act explaining to the audience just what happened to young Geoffrey, Uncle Horace and Cousin Millicent since last we saw them. Even such shrewd old hands at the playwriting game as Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman had their troubles with the formula earlier this season when they put on "The Land Is Bright," a melodrama laid in a Fifth Avenue mansion, tracing the activities of one of New York's First Families from the opulent old days of the past century up to the present.

We encountered a lady only the other day who never did figure out just who married whom in the third generation of that opus, not that it seemed to matter very much.

The Warrens of Massachusetts

"Under This Roof" is clearer on this score than many such period dramas, because it doesn't try to crowd too many people into the old Warren homestead near Boston. The Warrens, a family of fine old Patriot stock, were proud of the fact that old Zebulon Warren died at Concord. His descendants, farmers, mill owners and rising Boston bankers, sent their sons to Harvard and Integrity was their middle-name. In 1846 Gibeon, a firebrand, shocked his conservative contemporaries by joining the Abolitionists and rushing off to Missouri to echo the cry of William Lloyd Garrison.

In 1864 David, his nephew, who read Byron and flunked out of Harvard his freshman year, ran away from home to enlist in the cause of Freedom, and was killed in the Battle of the Wilderness. Three years later his upright banker-father lent the proud Warren name to a crooked scheme to put through a Pacific Railroad at the expense of the country because he saw how he could clean up a million dollars on the deal.

Mr. Ehrmann's writing of the scene in which Ezra Warren falls victim to the "get-rich-quick" talk of Senator Flower and Mr. Gassaway from that metropolis of iniquity, New York City, displayed a refreshingly astringent cynicism, but it is doubtful if the author of "Under This Roof" is actually a cynic at heart. In the last act Ezra gets his just reward on being wiped out in the panic of '73, but not before his lovely wife, who does settlement work among the immigrants, has a chance to point out that we must set a better example than Ezra did to the foreign-born who come over here to escape tyranny if we would have them appreciate our Freedom and live up to it.

All this is acted rather better than such plays usually are, by Barbara O'Neil as Cornelia Warren, Ezra's wife; Russell Hardie as Ezra himself, and John Draper, Louise Galloway, Peter Hobbs, Harlan Briggs and James O'Neill, among others, in smaller roles. Mr. Lewis, the stage director, can do little to relieve the sluggish pace of the play, or to help the actors overcome the playwright's tendency to write a series of public speeches rather than a genuinely stirring drama, but he has kept his players from rummaging in their make-up boxes and growing positively decrepit in twenty-five years or so. Mr. Hardie and Miss O'Neil age a bit, but do not totter about white-haired and riddled with rheumatism simply because the program says some years have passed and they must be getting on well into the forties. For this fact alone, "Under This Roof" deserves some sort of medal.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
February 23, 1942

God vs. Mammon Under One Roof

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THOUGH *Under This Roof* wholly fails at what it tries to do, at least it is one of the very few plays this season that have even tried. Mr. Ehrmann has taken a serious theme and treated it with sincerity and thoughtfulness. He has nowhere cheapened it or slicked it up. For this reason it is unfortunate that he has nowhere dramatized or illuminated it either, and that he can be praised for nothing beyond his intentions.

Under This Roof is the story of a New England family between 1846 and 1873. The Warrens possess those twin New England traits —those Cain-and-Abel traits—of true idealism and crass materialism, of the itching palm and the itching conscience. One of them lays down his life as a passionate Abolitionist, another as a soldier fighting the real cause of the Civil War. But Ezra Warren, with whom Mr. Ehrmann is most concerned, devotes his life to making money and acquiring power, first with clean hands, later with dirty ones; only to emerge, at the end, broken and empty-handed.

A nation that from first to last has been fiercely torn between serving God and Mammon cannot too often, perhaps, be invited to consider the fact; but Mr. Ehrmann's demonstration is entirely too crude and didactic. He has very little dramatic sense, which tells against him doubly in a play that, to begin with, might better have been a novel. But he has no psychological sense either, so that his characters are drawn wholly on moral lines, without complexities or contradictions, and end up as symbols rather than people. His triple failure—as dramatist, moralist and psychologist alike—comes out (to go no further) in the fact that the two conflicting strains which characterize the Warrens almost never appear in the same person. Hence the people themselves never undergo moral struggles, never provide any drama of human character; good and evil never lodge in the same body. Good and evil are merely—in the trite manner of the morality play—lined up at opposite ends of he stage.

Beyond all this, the stagecraft of *Under This Roof* is faltering, the dialogue is too often sententious, and the mood is entirely lacking in any sort of suspense.

There are a number of creditable performances, if no distinguished ones. As Ezra, Russel Hardie is perhaps too likeable for his own artistic good, but Barbara O'Neil is warm and dignified as his wife, and in smaller parts Louise Galloway, Peter Hobbs, John Draper and Harlan Briggs are all very effective.

"Under This Roof"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
February 23, 1942

'Under This Roof,' Or the Decline and Fall of Ezra Warren

"Under This Roof," drama by Herbert B. Ehrmann. Produced by Russell Lewis and Rita Hassan at the Windsor Theatre, New York, Feb. 22, 1942.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

BACK in the Spring of 1846, which is quite a spell back, the Abner Warrens were living on the old Zebulon Warren place just outside of Boston, near Mount Wachusett.

Yes, sir—and under the same roof, too, that old Zebulon built back in the 1770s. Abner Warren was a just man, but hard. Ruled his home and his family about as you might expect a Massachusetts Warren to rule.

Planned to raise his sons, Ezra and Gibeon, to take over the mills and carry on in the Warren tradition. Ezra was willin', but Gibeon, he got excited about Garrison and the abolitionists. When his father told him he either had to give up his crazy talk about fighting for freedom or clear out, Gibeon up and left for the Missouri territory.

Which was tough on Cornelia. She kinda expected to marry Gibeon. When he ran away, and she didn't hear from him, she married Ezra instead.

David, Too

Well, it's a fairly long and pretty dull story after that. Ezra and Cornelia had a son, David. Bright boy, though he didn't do so well in Harvard. David ran afoul of Ezra, as Gibeon had run afoul of Abner, and David left home, too, to fight for freedom in the Civil War.

(I can't quite understand why Herbert B. Ehrmann, who wrote "Under This Roof," which opened last night at the Windsor Theatre, wanted to kill off his two most interesting characters early in his play. Seems such a waste. But perhaps he had a reason.)

With David gone and Cornelia getting more melancholy act by act, Ezra grew a mite careless and sold the good old Warren name for a mess of Pacific Railway stock, knowing that to be a crooked deal. Cornelia left Ezra after that and in the panic of 1873 Ezra went on the rocks.

I got the idea as I was leaving the theatre, however, that she was going to take him back. It may be the Warrens will ride again on old Zeb's farm. Even if they do, I'm afraid it won't matter much.

I have a feeling Mr. Ehrmann believed he was writing an honest and moving New England biography. Honest it is, but it isn't moving. Interest in the Warrens declines rather than builds after the first act, and that is fatal with character drama.

A good solid performance by Russell Hardie as Ezra. A good competent performance by Barbara O'Neil as Cornelia. Nice wholesome study of a juvenile David by John Draper.

Pleasant character touches by Louise Galloway and Harlan Briggs. Useful setting by Perry Watkins and interesting 19th century costumes by Ernest Shrapps. But nothing, I fear, in the drama line worth buying or selling.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
February 23, 1942

American Family

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

FEW recent plays have had more honorable intentions than Herbert B. Ehrmann's "Under This Roof." With deep sincerity and great gravity, it is preaching an earnest sermon on the meaning of American patriotism. Peering with intensity at some thirty years in the history of a New England family during the turbulent middle of the last century, it reminds us that love of country should be as great in peace as in war, that the strain of idealism in the national character must not be allowed to perish and that the greatest peril in a country's life comes through moral laxity. There can be no doubt of the importance of these lessons, just as there can be no question that the author, a liberal Boston attorney, means every word that he says. The great trouble is that he and his play are all worthiness of purpose and no effectiveness of execution.

* * *

For, as happens too often in so difficult a medium as the theatre, this new drama, which is so passionately anxious to speak to us with moving eloquence of the state of the nation and of its history, is weak, feeble and ineffectual and ends by wearying, rather than exhilarating, its spectators. It is speaking of the descendants of old Zebulon Warren, who had died heroically during the Revolution; of his daughter, who at the age of seventy, recalled that as a child she had seen him die for liberty and who had not forgot his beliefs; of young Gibeon, who fought against slavery before the Civil War, and of his nephew, David, who battled against it during the War; of Cornelia Warren, who had deserted Gibeon in his time of need and had lived to regret it, and of Ezra, who sneered at the ideals of his country. But it tells their family history without dramatic skill, and the narrative becomes flat and dreary and emotionally colorless.

* * *

On the one side, there is no genuine suspense or striking drama, just the flat recounting of the Warren annals. On the other, the men and women of the Warren clan are rarely drawn with the sort of expertness which might have made them alive and warmly human and not merely stock figures to which the playwright might attach his message. It is a natural result that the acting is in most cases inclined to be colorless despite the earnest work of the players involved. Miss Barbara O'Neil, who has been away from the stage a long time, returns with a simple and honest portrayal as the frail Cornelia, who learns too late her lesson of idealism. Miss Louise Galloway, as the patriotic matriarch; Russell Hardie, as the cynical Ezra; Peter Hobbs and David Warren as two valiant Warrens and Howard St. John as a well-meaning but weak-kneed clergyman are properly sincere, but it is Harlan Briggs as a corrupt financier from New York who gives the only real life and color to the proceedings. That is the way the prankish theatre has of turning upon its idealists in their moment of need.

Critics'

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Critics'

Theatre Reviews

"Under This Roof"

NEW YORK TIMES
February 23, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Under This Roof"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

BY GOING back to nineteenth-century New England, Herbert B. Ehrmann has found several matters of moral principle that apply today, and he has put together a play about them, "Under This Roof," which was acted at the Windsor last evening. For the struggle that shook the nation then was for freedom; and after the victory was won, the peace was rapacious and ignoble.

Mr. Ehrmann is a Boston attorney who once studied playwriting under the illustrious G. P. Baker. As an exercise in dramatic composition "Under This Roof" is observant, high-minded and industrious. Mr. Ehrmann has culled some good ideas from social history and he has put them into stage form by main strength. But the play he has pieced together never acquires momentum of its own. As the characters move down through the years you are always aware of Mr. Ehrmann standing backstage, anxiously pushing and guiding. What he says in "Under This Roof" he could express with greater eloquence in a direct speech, like his concluding line: "Freedom is great, not because men have died for it, but because of what living men can do with it." That is not a correct quotation, but it is the gist of what he is saying.

* * *

When his play opens in 1846, near Mount Wachusett, and not far from Concord, Cornelia Warren is choosing her future. She loves a young man who has joined the insurgent Abolitionist cause, but she refuses to accept the insecurity and opprobrium of a radical's career. Although she marries for money, she does not escape the cause of freedom. In 1864 her son has to make the same choice. He joins the Army of the North and is killed in the Wilderness battle. After the war, the choice she has made still curses her. For her husband loses his fortune and honor in the corrupt financing of a transcontinental railroad. Their flight from freedom brings them to disaster in the last scene.

* * *

For at heart "Under This Roof" is a simple morality play about a woman who loses her life by trying to save it when she makes her first crucial decision. Mr. Ehrmann writes like a cultivated man who appreciates the rich treasure of New England social history. People of all sorts were making those great decisions in the nineteenth century, for the present and for posterity. Although today we honor those who made the right decisions, they were not altogether popular then; and in the first scene of "Under This Roof" Mr. Ehrmann reminds us that Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne were regarded as dangerous men by many substantial New Englanders. Mr. Ehrmann's scholarship and thinking are good. What he lacks is the precious knack of writing for the stage.

* * *

Nothing in Russell Lewis's direction is of much help to him. A good stage manager could have directed the performance as ably. Barbara O'Neil plays the central part of Cornelia Warren with taste and grace of character. As the man she marries, Russell Hardie's breathless and episodic acting never penetrates inside the character Mr. Ehrmann has tried to write. Harlan Briggs contributes an amusing sketch of a New York swindler, and James O'Neill does an entertaining bit as a village Yankee who keeps his words and deals close to the chest. There are interesting performances by Howard St. John, John Draper and Watson White.

All the action of the play occurs inside an attractive New England living room, designed by Perry Watkins and lighted by accident. "Under This Roof" is a play with some good ideas. Probably Mr. Ehrmann could make them sound more dramatic in a well-constructed brief.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
February 23, 1942

'Under This Roof' Opens at Windsor

What Happened to New England Family in Civil War Is Compared to Present

By JOHN ANDERSON

BY WRITING a play about a New England family of Civil War days the author of "Under This Roof," which opened last night at the Windsor, has drawn an obvious parallel to present times. The conservative members of the Warren household looked on the Abolitionists as radicals, denounced Emerson and the Brook Farm prophets as dangerous agitators, and referred to the President as "that clown in the White House."

But Mr. Ehrmann's instinct for parallels is greater, I fear, than his talent as a playwright, for while his play has the merit of deep sincerity and honest feeling it is pretty weak in the other departments. When he doesn't know what to do with a character he just has another character refer to the fact that poor so-and-so died at some time after his last exit, and so his drama is strewn not only with good intentions but with the offstage deceased. I feared, at one time, that if he polished many more off there wouldn't be a quorum for the final curtain.

This unhappy and somewhat drastic solution of Mr. Ehrmann's problem leaves the meaning of the play somewhat vague. He explains that the Warrens are a strange lot —you can never tell whether a Warren's conscience or his palm will itch him most. Granny, Gibeon and David, stretching over three generations, had itching consciences.

They were moralists and fighting idealists. But Ezra had the itching palm and he finally sold even the family name and honor for a fortune to be lost in the panic of 1873.

The trouble is that when Granny, Gibeon and David die (Granny of natural causes and the other two for causes they believed in), Ezra becomes the central character of the play and from any viewpoint Ezra is a hypocritical shoundrel.

Under pretensions of respectability he has robbed his neighbors and wrecked his town, but when he comes home for sympathy in the last act Mr. Ehrmann suggests that he will regain his "integrity," which was the first time I knew he was supposed to have any.

Thus the viewpoint of the play seems to shift, leaving the ending rather pointless and inconclusive. There is a repeated suggestion that ideals of war must be cherished in time of peace, but this theme was stated rather than dramatized.

Mr. Ehrmann is, I hear, a lawyer who once studied playwriting under Prof. Baker in the Harvard Workshop, and he gives his play now and then the benefit of sharp characterization and some effective lines. He makes some sound observations and his heart seems to be in the right place. His sketches of a complacent politician and a big-time crook are neatly turned and admirably acted, the senator by Watson White and the financier by Harlan Briggs.

Russell Hardie takes the rascally Ezra from the smug youth of 1846 to the elderly bankrupt of 1873 with appropriate signals of age and Barbara O'Neil, as a young woman who became Mrs. Ezra because she preferred comfort to her own integrity struggled gallantly with an ungracious and hopeless part. I wish I could say more for a rather inept production that is badly lighted and clumsily directed.

In other words, this is a notice designed to encourage the playwright but not the playgoer. Mr. Ehrmann has looked under the roof without raising it.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
February 23, 1942

A Play About the Civil War

By NORTON MOCKRIDGE

HERBERT B. EHRMANN, author of Under This Roof, which opened last night at the Windsor, is a Boston lawyer with a yen for playwriting. Indeed, upon his graduation from Harvard in 1912, he took counsel with George Baker, drama professor, concerning the possibilities of a theatrical career, but the professor advised him to adhere to the law.

Mr. Baker's wisdom was most apparent last night, for Mr. Ehrmann, a successful lawyer who gained attention as an associate in the Sacco and Vanzetti case, is not a good playwright. This is a sorry declaration, too, since it is obvious that Mr. Ehrmann is terribly sincere and much in love with the theatre.

His play, nonetheless, is confused, poorly written, badly constructed and, worst of all, as leisurely as a churchless Sunday morning. There are long speeches, overdrawn scenes and an astonishing paucity of action.

It seems unlikely that Mr. Ehrmann's characters could have gone through life as immobile as they are pictured. Patiently we waited for one of them, if only by way of rebellion, to bend a poker over another's head or smash a few of the period lamps. But nothing ever happened.

* * *

A Civil War Parallel

The point of it all was obscure, although one eventually realized the author was attempting to draw a parallel between Civil War days and the present. He has some interesting ideas on man's constant struggle for freedom, but his method of expression falters badly.

The action, if we may call it that, takes place in the Warren family farmhouse just outside Boston from 1846 to 1873. During this time Gibeon Warren, a young abolitionist, goes off to fight and die alone for his cause when his sweetheart, Cornelia, chooses the security offered by businesslike Ezra Warren.

Cornelia ages gracefully and watches her only son, David, then 17, march off to give his life in the Civil War. Thereafter, her husband becomes involved in a crooked railroad deal and, when she remonstrates, he leaves her. Some years later, ruined in the panic of '73, he returns to ask her forgiveness.

In what strikes us as a rather incredulous but welcome ending, it is indicated she'll help him start anew. Perhaps this is as it should be, but by then we were too numb to appreciate it.

* * *

Barbara O'Neil

We did appreciate, however, the presence of Barbara O'Neil, a statuesque brunette whose interpretation of Cornelia was so well managed one scarcely minded the unwieldy lines. Miss O'Neil, whose performance as the insane wife in the film, All This and Heaven, Too, was a cinematic gem of last year, is a likely candidate to join the ranks of our better actresses.

Russell Hardie, as her husband, made the most of his material and Louise Galloway as Granny Warren and Harlan Briggs as a conniving financier (or are we redundant?) were amusing in small roles.

Direction by Russell Lewis, co-producer with Rita Hassan, was singularly uninspired. The settings by Perry Watkins were in order, but the lighting was so poorly engineered that most of the players constantly had dark circles under their eyes. By the final curtain we had them, too, but not from lighting.

"Plan M"

NEW YORK POST
February 21, 1942

A German Super-Spy Directs the Invasion of Britain in "Plan M"

By WILELLA WALDORF

JAMES EDWARD GRANT'S plot outline for "Plan M," a spy melodrama involving a German invasion of Great Britain, is potentially so exciting that it is a pity he has made such a poor play of it at the Belasco Theatre.

Mr. Grant envisions a daring Nazi coup whereby a German soldier, long trained for the task, steps into the uniform of General Sir Hugh Winston in London's War Office while a military review is going on in the courtyard below involving the King, the Prime Minister and sundry high Army, Navy and Air-Force officials. A mysterious explosion occurs, removing most of the brass-hats and leaving the spurious Sir Hugh in entire charge of repelling the imminent German invasion. Substituting a fake Plan M for the real one prepared in advance for just such an emergency, the super-spy deploys Britain's armed forces in all the wrong directions, over-rides the frenzied objections of his worried aides, and almost succeeds in delivering the British Isles into Hitler's hands from the Empire's own War Office.

The first scene in which the substitution occurs is effectively staged at the Belasco, but once the German spy is established at Sir Hugh's desk, his major task is to stall for time while the invasion proceeds according to the schedule prepared in Berlin. This might have been tensely and skillfully developed, but instead the author forces his actors to wallow in long stretches of sappy dialogue full of banal cliches. We could hardly blame some of them for stumbling over the words now and then.

The Great Impersonation

Several ingenious and fascinating novels of German-British espionage have been published since the war began, and we had hopes for a few brief moments last night that "Plan M" might prove to be an equally absorbing affair, perhaps even more hair-raising in the theatre than any mere book could be. But the better spy novels are generally well written, while "Plan M" soon descends to the level of the shilling shocker. If it were ever printed in book form, it is the sort of thing that would be done on pulp, with a lurid cover for small boys of all ages to gape at.

Mr. Grant believes in making things very, very obvious. Although each stage of the plot is fairly clear in the production at the Belasco, it is explained all over again in words of one syllable every so often just in case anybody in the audience happened to miss the point. While the War Office staff is sitting around waiting for the invaders to invade, old Doctor Hawes, the doddering Fifth Columnist, totters around the office drooling about what a gigantic, staggering plot it all is. And when it is pointed out that the fellow who has stepped into General Winston's shoes is rapidly developing a Napoleon complex, this, too, has to be explained, with diagrams, every few minutes. As for Mr. Grant's ideas of humor and Sex Stuff, they are deplorable. We felt downright sorry for a good actor like A. P. Kaye, saddled with some of the stupidest comedy on record.

The technical stage effects at the Belasco are well enough managed under Marion Gering's direction, and Lemuel Ayers' setting is effectively contrived, but most of the actors last night seemed to be in suffering as violently from nerves as if they were actually undergoing an invasion from overseas. Len Doyle, an interesting actor, managed to make something now and then of his dual role, changing neatly from the real Sir Hugh to the phoney one, and a large company of well-known players rushed in and out, fighting the dialogue and the enemy with grit and determination.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
February 21, 1942

"Plan M" a Fantastic Drama Foreshadows England's Invasion

"Plan M," drama by James Edward Grant. Produced by Aldrich and Myers at the Belasco Theatre, New York, Feb. 20, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

FOR two mortal hours in the Belasco Theatre last night a lightly stunned audience waited anxiously for James Edward Grant to drop the other shoe. James Edward is the author of a war play called "Plan M," and he offers you the tension drama at its tensest.

It is an example of wartime playwriting that I feel is too clever by half. It defeats itself through the bold and studied skill of its author.

Mr. Grant poses the possibility of the Germans taking over Britain's War Office by substituting a dummy commanding officer so exactly like the original that he fools the General Staff and all the office personnel.

Projecting this fantastic premise as a perfect fifth column approach, Mr. Grant asks you to spend the rest of the evening waiting as patiently as may be while he creeps toward the explosion of a time bomb.

The invaders substitute their own Plan M, one making invasion simple, for one the War Office has been working on for months. Naturally it must have been so secret a plan that only the author, the enemy and the deposed war lord knew of its workings.

Nazi Efficiency

The substitute Nazi rules with an iron hand. The office force, including a former attachment of the murdered General's and his unclaimed daughter, admits that his personality has suddenly taken on a new force, but not until time grows short in the last act is the suspicion even partly confirmed.

Every trick that is turned is turned to the advantage of the Nazi plotters. Orders transmitted by teletype machine and direct wire are relayed only for the furtherance of the plot. Minor rebellions are crushed in the bud. A British Admiral is shot down and the trumped up excuse of his insubordination accepted against him.

The technique is that of the motion picture writer, which is author Grant's business, and at which job he is accepted as being expert. The entire action covers no more than three hours. There is meticulous attention paid to the use of practical properties. The employment of an elaborate communications system is perfectly detailed.

Good Actors

The cast, too, is expertly chosen. Len Doyle, doubling the roles of the British General who is smothered in his bath cabinet and that of his Nazi successor, preserve a nicely realistic and entirely convincing balance in character.

Anne Burr, playing the neurotic secretary-daughter, is also able to preserve a helpful suggestion of plausibility. Lumsden Hare stumbles a bit as the deluded fifth columnist, as such a fifth columnist probably would. Douglas Gilmore makes the General's chief Nazi aide properly menacing.

The Messrs. Aldrich and Myers have produced "Plan M" generously. The setting by Lemuel Ayers is attractive, the fittings ingenious and practical. Marion Gering's direction is devoted to sustaining the suspense rather than relieving it, and a judicious amount of relief is what this type of melodrama, it seems to me, stands most definitely in need of.

Last night's audience was plainly interested and rewarding at the play's close.

NEW YORK TIMES
February 21, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Plan M"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

FOR purposes of melodrama, James Edward Grant has casually supposed that a Nazi spy might impersonate the chief of staff in the British War Office and betray the defense of England. "Plan M" is what Mr. Grant calls it. It was acted at the Belasco last evening. Since this is a free country, Mr. Grant, a Hollywood writer, can suppose anything that amuses him and put it on the stage with round actors.

But a startled theatregoer still has the privilege of observing that Mr. Grant's Mother Goose plot yields one of the most useless dramas of the season. Although he is not personally responsible for war conditions that exist at the moment when his play is offered to the public, the current news does not exactly recommend his frivolous idea as an amusing one. Under Marion Gering's direction "Plan M" is well staged and acted. But Mr. Grant's notion of fun is a gaunt one in the dark, bleak Winter of 1942.

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In the first scene General Sir Hugh Winston (i. e., the genuine article) is ailing somewhat pompously in the War Office. His physician comes to put him in the electric baking cabinet as usual. It has occurred to Mr. Grant in one of his flamboyant moments that the General's physician and his two assistants might be Nazi spies, which is exactly what turns out to be the case. When the General is locked in the baking cabinet a Nazi spy who is the General's replica takes over command, puts a false plan of defense into action, fools all of the War Cabinet associates and leads England's army and navy into a hopeless muddle before he is found out. Quite a piece of foolishness.

If the United Nations' war effort were going famously at the moment, Mr. Grant's little speculation might be innocuous. Some strange things do drive the theatre insane on ordinary occasions. But even if the battle of England had been fought out and finally won by England, Mr. Grant's piece of hocus-pocus would hardly seem credible, even for purposes of idle melodrama. The probabilities are stacked too high against it. A passive personality might conceivably be duplicated, at least on the stage. But the personality, intricate military knowledge and intimate associations of a man who is actively directing a wide-flung campaign are too complex to be duplicated plausibly even off the stage. Stop pulling our legs, Mr. Grant, if you please.

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For a setting, Lemuel Ayres has constructed a fascinating interior of military headquarters with a huge map of England, spotted with flashing lights at the points of invasion. Mr. Gering's direction is generally satisfactory. As the genuine general and also as the bogus one, Len Doyle gives an able performance, distinguishing between the two gentlemen by sticking out his tummy with Teuton swank. Lumsden Hare has an impressive medical presence as the physician—bald, bespectacled and benevolent. Anne Burr acts a psychiatric secretary with some personal initiative, and Margery Maude contributes a pleasant portrait as her mother.

But "Plan M" is the sort of theatrical gewgaw that is more superfluous than usual now. It would be less gruesome to pretend that three English spies were taking over the Nazi command, although this column honestly cannot advise any experiments of the kind in the field of adult entertainment.

"Plan M"

NEW YORK SUN
February 21, 1942

'Plan M,' an Inexpert Thriller, Opens at Belasco Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

PLOTTING Germans seize the "nerve center of the British Empire" in "Plan M," which opened last evening at the Belasco Theater, and sit on it pretty heavily for a couple of hours before one of them spoils all by kissing the wrong girl. Lights flash on maps, annunciators grate harshly and the characters often announce that the excitement is almost more than they can bear. Those who want real excitement from "Plan M" will apparently have to join Actors Equity.

James Edward Grant's play has the outward semblance of a thriller. It is improbable, of course, that German agents could enter the office of a British general commanding operations, kill him and provide an indistinguishable substitute, and still have time to kidnap the king and all the members of the government. But improbability is not necessarily a flaw in thrillers. One of the best of the recent crop assumes that a British secret agent can act as a police head in the Reich for years, doing fine mischief the while, and improbabilities do not, I fear, grow much bigger. But it seems entirely reasonable at the time and nobody can ask more. The trick works.

The trick, although obviously a difficult one to turn, is not difficult to state. In thrillers the improbable must happen so fast that the reader or audience member has no time for doubts. Thrillers must be so full of small probabilities, all in themselves so exciting, that the major absurdity is taken for granted. The sleight of hand must be so impeccable that the eye, if not the mind, is utterly and painlessly hoodwinked.

"Plan M" misses these tricks of the trade. The little excitements are neither numerous nor convincing, and the big excitements are off-stage. (The Germans have concocted a British defense plan to suit themselves, and outraged generals, admirals and flying officers fill the annunciators with lengthy protests. These make the Germans chuckle, in a vague way.) The play is static and the mind has ample time to discover that it is also preposterous—that men do not have doubles so perfect that their intimates are deceived; that kings and governments are not to be captured by a few bright young spies. "Plan M" is, in a word, the one thing melodrama may not be. It is inexpert.

It is also rather inexpertly staged, too slowly timed and, I suspect, insufficiently rehearsed. Many things did not go well last evening. Annunciators spoke before they were spoken to, or failed to answer when they were. On one memorable occasion a voice began in one loud speaker and passed, eerily, to another, leaving the visible characters to pursue it wistfully. Unidentified chimes sounded half-heartedly from time to time and doors of portable steam rooms—used to get rid of loyal generals, if you are interested—embarrassingly refused to close. These are small things, but in melodrama they hurt.

The actors did as they were able, which in several instances was well enough. A. P. Kaye was pleasant in odd moments, as Mr. Kaye always is; Len Doyle went through the long central role with proper calm; Lumsden Hare, trapped on the stage from start to finish and seldom with anything to do, did nothing with unobstrusive skill. Anne Burr was effectively emotional and all the off-stage voices were resonant. The play, on the other hand, had a small, tired voice.

'PLAN M'

A melodrama in three acts by James Edward Grant; directed by Marion Gering; setting by Lemuel Ayers; presented at the Belasco Theater on February 20, 1942, by Aldrich and Myers. The cast:

Orderly Horton ..... A. P. Kaye
Mrs. Bodleigh ..... Joanna Duncan
Marjorie Barr ..... Anne Burr
Colonel Clegg ..... Stapleton Kent
Wing Commander Rambeau .. Ellis Irving
Mrs. Barr ..... Margery Maude
Rear Admiral Spring .... Charles Gerrard
Brigadier Husted ..... Neil Fitzgerald
General Sir Hugh Winston ..... Len Doyle
Dr. Hawes ..... Lumsden Hare
Colonel Corliss ..... Douglas Gilmore
Private Thurston ..... Lathrop Mitchell
Private McCoy ..... Edmond Le Comte
Sir Ethan Foy ..... Stuart Casey
Admiral Farnsworth ..... Reynolds Denniston
Dr. James Goggin ..... Hector Mac Donald
Naval Staff ..... Lathrop Mitchell
Commander Spayer ..... Earl Johf
Colonel O'Gallagher ..... Gerald Desmond
Major Stanton ..... Wilfred Edge
General Leffing ..... John Mahin
Wing Commander Kleghly ..... Edmond Le Comte
Major Carter ..... Theodore Clapper
General Calverly ..... Guy Spaull
General Gaynor ..... Albert Lawrence
General Margolies ..... Mar Gnireg

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
February 21, 1942

'Plan M' Presented At Belasco Theatre

Melodrama Centers on Clever Scheme to Invade England

By JOHN ANDERSON

LIKE the fellow who built a motor boat in his cellar and then couldn't get it out the author of "Plan M" has done a lot of construction work that doesn't get him anywhere. As presented by Aldrich and Myers at the Belasco last night the new melodrama is an elaborate piece of stage mechanism, carefully contrived by James Edward Grant to cause thrills, creeps, and pleasurable jitters. Instead it creates merely a light doze and the aisle-itch, both symptoms of a yen for the great open places across 44th st.

Mr. Grant stretches our credulity a good deal further than he does his three acts, which is quite a stretch. But the boldness of his plot is not the real reason for its failure. Good melodrama can make an audience believe things it knows are not true, at least for the duration of the play. "Plan M" misses its effect because it is clumsy and obvious. It seems so anxious to prove its incredible tale that it forgets to let the audience imagine it—which is the easiest way to get an audience to swallow a whopping yarn.

Clever Scheme

This particular whopper has to do with an incredibly clever scheme for the invasion of Britain by kidnaping the king and his cabinet while an imposter, trained and remodelled by plastic surgery to be the identical image of the British chief of staff. The real general is bumped off in an electric cabinet (cooler I imagine than a lot of political ones) and the false officer moves into the nerve center of headquarters as Hitler launches the lunge.

By substituting a false Plan M for the real Plan M, designed to beat off the invasion, the fleet is immobilized, reinforcements are sent to the wrong coast, and just as England totters the real general's wife discovers that the trimming she gave the real general's moustache an hour before has disappeared. The German ideal of thoroughness, I suppose, had overlooked the human possibility of such a small mistake. The fate of Britain hangs in "Plan M" by a hair.

There are some other points which the author touches without ever making them dramatically interesting. The lowly corporal drilled and re-vamped to resemble the general develops delusions of grandeur and forgets that he is merely a puppet. The marionette begins to snarl the strings. The slight mistake of clasping his alleged daughter somewhat unpaternally spills the beans.

Well Acted

All of which is preposterous and foolish and tiresome only when an author fails to make his audience accept it. With smarter writing, without the dejected opening scenes and the soggy stretches of inert dialogue, without the repetition and careful explanation it might have been neither more nor less believable than the bombazine borgias of "Arsenic and Old Lace."

Under Marion Gering's direction it is well enough acted by a large cast in which Len Doyle, once the teller of equally tall tales in "The Time of Your Life" plays the fake general with adroit touches of expanding egoism and Nazi brutality. Lumsden Hare plays his phonily medical accomplice with suitable qualms. Reynolds Denniston makes an admirably belligerent admiral who disobeys the fake chief of staff and dies of the Nazi general disease. Lemuel Ayers' single setting is excellent.

I don't suppose anything like "Plan M" could ever happen anywhere except on the stage in the wildest imagination, and apparently it can't even happen on the stage.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
February 22, 1942

A Nazi Invasion You Can Ignore

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

ON THE day that the Nazis are going to invade England, things start off briskly at the British War Office. A friendly doctor and his two assistants —who are really a trio of Nazi agents—privately poison the War Minister, and one of the Nazis immediately impersonates him. He thereupon puts into operation a faked defense plan which will louse up the country. British generals, admirals and wing commanders yowl from time to time, but only get snubbed or shot for their yowling; and for almost three acts the Nazi gets away with his impersonation.

This is considerably longer than Mr. Grant gets away with his impersonation of a playwright. Even in these apprehensive days, *Plan M* is such far-fetched and unconvincing hokum that it leaves you quite carefree and even a trifle bored. The British War Office has taken a lot of beatings from all kinds of critics, but until now nobody has considered it so inefficient that three men could turn it upside down in daylight.

Still, one would put up with all this nonsensical hanky-panky if one got a real thriller as a result. But *Plan M* is anything but exciting. It jogs along trying to live down its original absurdity with wads of realistic detail about what is happening all over England. Phones, buzzers and teletype machines play so large a part that I really ought to discuss their performances along with the actors'. Mr. Grant's best achievement consists in showing how the impersonator, a very minor Nazi, gets drunk (and at last undone) from his new sense of power as "General Winston."

Marion Gering has contributed some helpful direction, Len Doyle plays the imposter creditably, and the rest of the cast are adequate if uninspired.